

Case No. 101/WILD/1985

Wildifous Loversus
represented by
Mr. Animalix

VERSUS

the Indiame Science Institute
represented
Mr. I.Sc. Bureaucratix

In the court of Mr. Justice Humaneix

CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION : 'My Lord, it is with a sense of shame that the petitioner, a member of the community represented by the accused, presents this petition. The accused, referred to hereinafter as 'the Institute' says in its "Handbook of Information-84-85" that it "believes in promoting the dissemination of scientific knowledge and the spread of science culture to the community" - very laudable objectives indeed. But what if these so-called 'disseminators of scientific knowledge and culture' indulge in grossly unscientific practices themselves? I am referring to the massacre of the beautiful creation of God - the snake - that has been going on in the Institute's campus. The facts are as follows:

In 1978, the Institute promulgated a scheme whereinunder a sum of Rs.1/- (raised subsequently to Rs 5/-) is paid to anyone producing a snake killed in the the campus. Since then, atleast 200 snakes have fallen prey to this inhumane scheme.

It will not be easy to find an example of a more indefensible case of the heartless extermination of the wonderful wildlife of our country - actually promoted by an institution of 'scientific' research! Consider the facts :

- (i) Out of 216 species of snakes found in India only 52 are venomous to any extent - just 4 being fatally so !
- (ii) Of the latter only 2 are found within the campus; amounting to less than 10% of the total snake population in that area

(iii) Anti-venom for all these species is available and can be kept at the Institute's health centre

(iv) Snakes being by nature afraid of man, there has not been a single case of snake-bite in the campus for atleast the past 25 years.

*1 Cobra bite - 1990 -
Aqtrs. - under gutter - not fatal -
treated.*

My Lord, this obnoxious scheme is thus not only superfluous for the safety of the campus residents, but has also led to a proliferation of rats, a drastic curtailment of the population of magnificent birds like eagles & owls and a fostering of the blind fear and hatred of the snake species in the minds of the campus residents. Can any sentence be too harsh for such a cruel and shockingly unscientific deed?

CASE FOR THE DEFENCE : My Lord, the Institute, built 75 years ago on primarily forest land, is still today quite thickly vegetated, but the area around the campus has been completely urbanised within the past decade. This drastic encroachment of the snakes' traditional habitat has led to their seeking refuge in the campus - resulting in a significant increase in the number of snakes in it. The effect of this on campus life was quite serious. A snake entering and hiding in a lab brings the work therein to an instant halt! While maalis and grass cutters refused to work in thickly grassed areas, residents and their children were on tenterhooks while moving about at night! Taking all this into consideration, the authorities were forced to adopt some measure in order to prevent the snake problem disturbing the tenor of work in the campus.

The monetary reward is only a token honorarium to the person (usually a security guard) called upon at odd hours to do the risky job of removing a snake from vague places - nobody roams about the campus thirsting for snake blood! I submit that this is just an administrative measure implemented to ensure the well-being of the campus community.

JUDGE HUMANEIX: This case is a classic example of the recurring conflict between those who care sincerely for the natural environment and its members about us and those who are trying equally sincerely to do the difficult job of ensuring the development of the human community - a conflict not easy to resolve! But in this particular case, I feel that as leaders of science in the country, it is the duty of the powers that be in the Institute

to look beyond purely administrative measures (no doubt justifiable in a narrow sense) and provide some lasting solution. If a school in rural Karnataka could teach its students to handle even poisonous snakes and learn about them in order to remove their fear (born of ignorance and fostered by myth), surely the Institute can devote some funds for training a few guards to catch the snakes live and let them out in the open (as a short term step) and for educating the campus community as a whole in the long run? Instead of creating a drab, artificial and fragile environment insulated from the surrounding variety and beauty of Nature, can we not learn to coexist in harmony?

SHARAD LELE

LATE FOR THE CLASS ?

